

POLITICAL ASSASSINATION AND NIGERIA'S 4TH REPUBLIC: 1999-2007

Adeolu Durotoye

*Department of Political Science and International Studies
Afe Babalola University, Ado Ekiti, Nigeria*

Abstract

Not long after the return to democratic rule in 1999 following 15 years of uninterrupted military rule, Nigeria witnessed a troubling wave of political assassination. Political assassination became an instrument of settling political scores in Nigeria. Although some of the killings were discountenanced as ordinary murders, the timing of killings leaves no doubt that they were politically motivated. Actions by the government and police to stem the ugly tide and find the killers were insufficient and ineffective.

This paper examines this subject from the standpoint that there is no real democracy where people are afraid to engage in political competition for fear of being assassinated. Hence, political assassination constitutes serious danger to Nigeria's democracy. The paper reviews incidents of political assassination in Nigeria between 1999 and 2007, and proffers reasons for the unhealthy development, using narrative-analytical approach to accomplish its tasks. It concludes by suggesting ways of stopping or at least discouraging political assassination in Nigeria.

For the purposes of this article, political assassination is defined as the deliberate, premeditated murder of a prominent figure for political reasons.

Keywords: Politics, assassination, Nigeria, Democracy

1. INTRODUCTION

Nigeria's Police chief, Sunday Ehindero, alerted the National Assembly of the alarming security situation in Nigeria just before the 2007 elections;

"Now coming down to the security situation in the country in relation to the 2007 elections, I have to inform you that we have arms in large quantities in our society; proliferation of arms and ammunitions in our society...There is a big threat of proliferation of arms and ammunitions in this country. Some politicians do carry arms during rallies. Students have been caught with arms and ammunitions on their way to conventions, armed robbers carry sophisticated arms more than ever before. Cultism is rampant in our colleges, polytechnics and universities; some students' cultists have turned to armed robbers; some have been turned into tools in the hands of some politicians. From May 1, 2005 to August 22, 2006, over 1, 265 armed robbery suspects were arrested, 724 arms recovered and 27, 825 ammunitions were also recovered. It is a truism that election plays an important role in our democracy; in fact, without election, there cannot be democracy. However, elections since the 1960s have had their own problems of violence and acrimony. As we approach the 2007 elections, there appears to be a spate of political violence. Politics is about competition for power and of all the criteria of development, be it social, economic or cultural; it is the political

criterion that takes the lead particularly in our own system. This is because the stakes are high. That is why all methods are used to achieve political power, including violence. There ought to be a fundamental moral base in politics and the Machiavellian principle of the ends justify the means may not be acceptable".ⁱ

Writing in a similar vein during the same period, Edwin Madunagu stated "Of all the political developments that currently bother me, the one most difficult for me to analyze and comprehend appears be the new regime of political assassination in the south-east zone of Nigeria. General Sani Abacha's junta first professionalized political assassination, and then developed it into a systematic method of fighting the "enemies" of the state in general and the supporters of Chief Moshood Abiola in particular. After the death of the general and the inauguration of Obasanjo's government, the nation enjoyed a brief assassination-free period. Then the evil regime returned- thus confirming the thesis that a political weapon, once it emerges out of historical circumstances, does not simply disappear, and is not withdrawn at will... I can, without being cynical, advise a Nigerian politician who is scared by the specter of political assassination to disengage publicly from politics, and be seen to have done so... Whereas before Olusegun Obasanjo became president, the struggle was not altogether a do-or-die affair, it has now become so"ⁱⁱ

A magazine columnist in Nigeria once wrote "If you want to die, join Peoples Death Party (PDP)". He was actually making reference to the spate of killings, although not exclusively, but more rampant within the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP) in Nigeria. The killing of two gubernatorial aspirants in the Southwestern States of Lagos and Ekiti, both PDP gubernatorial aspirants, within three weeks of July and August 2006 further brought to the front burners the bane political assassination has brought to Nigeria's fledgling democracy. Since the 4th Republic political took off in 1999, there have been many unresolved assassinations believed to be politically motivated. This development has again brought into focus the unfolding dangerous trend in politicking in Nigeria. High profile political killings are gradually becoming a potent tool used by Nigerian politicians to settle political scores. The list of persons who fell to the bullets of the assassins or narrowly escaped such includes Chief Bola Ige, Harry Marshall, Alfred Dikibo, Andrew Agom, Funsho Williams, Ayo Daramola and so on. In the period under review, the struggle for power went beyond mere politicking and assassination became a "continuation of politics by other means". This paper will not focus on other cases of political violence that have become almost a daily occurrence in Nigeria. It focuses rather on cases of political assassination between 1999 and 2007.

2. CIRCUS OF UNRESOLVED POLITICAL ASSASSINATIONS IN NIGERIA

While the cases described below are a sample of some of the more high profile killings in Nigeria, they do not constitute an exhaustive list.

2.1. Chief Bola Ige

Nigeria's Justice Minister and Attorney General Bola Ige was shot dead in his home in Ibadan, in the southwestern state of Oyo, on December 23, 2001 becoming the highest level politician to have been killed in Nigeria while in office. Fingers were pointed at the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP) for complicity in his murder and Nobel Laureate, Wole Soyinka referred to the PDP as a "nest of killers". The murder case which accompanied his murder was muddled up as one political thug called Fryo who had confessed to being part of the murder and implicated the then Deputy Governor of Bola Ige's home State, Osun, was later left off the hook when the government withdrew the case from court for "want of evidence". His murder was widely linked to a political crisis between the Governor and Deputy Governor of Osun State, where Ige hailed from. Ige was the political mentor of the Governor, Bisi Akande who was at loggerhead with his deputy, Iyiola Omisore. Four days before Bola Ige's death, a member of the Osun State House of Assembly, Odunayo Olagbaju who

was a supporter of the deputy Governor, had been stabbed to death in Ile-Ife. Some believed Ige's killing was in retaliation of Olagbaju's while others were of the opinion that Ige was a victim of PDP's political chicanery in a desperate bid to control the South West being held by The Alliance for Democracy (AD) party of which Ige was the undisputed leader in the West. Ige had, a few months before his assassination, informed President Obasanjo that he was leaving Obasanjo's government to concentrate on building his party in preparation for the 2003 election. The Party had won in all the South West States in the 1999 election and the PDP needed a foothold in the region where president Obasanjo hailed from. In the 2003 election, PDP won all but one of the South West states largely due to the vacuum of leadership in the AD due to the assassination of Bola Ige.

2.2. Marshall Harry

On March 5, 2003, Harry Marshall, the national vice chairman for the South-South Zone of the now defunct All Nigeria's People's Party was killed in December 2001. Marshall Harry was an important politician both nationally and within Rivers State, where he was known as a political "kingmaker." He had supported the Rivers Governor Peter Odili in the 1999 election but later disagreed with Odili's policies and began a move to stop the reelection of Odili in 2003. He moved to the ANPP after his suspension by the People's Democratic Party (PDP) in 2001 for "anti-party" activities. He then began to campaign against President Obasanjo. Harry Marshall became the ANPP's national vice chairman, with responsibility for the South-South zone of Nigeria covering his home state of Rivers and several other states of the Niger delta area. He became a strong supporter of Sergeant Awuse, the ANPP's candidate for Rivers governor and a bitter opponent of Governor Odili. On the night of March 5 2003, some armed men in plain clothes came to Harry Marshall's residence in Abuja, the federal capital and made their way to his bedroom. He began to shout for help, but no help came even though his residence was located within walking distance of the headquarters of the Abuja police command. Although the motive for his killing was later said to have nothing to do with politics according to the Police, those familiar with the political scene in Rivers State believed that his death was related to the bad feeling between him and the Rivers State government, more so when his assassination occurred a few days to the kick-off of ANPP's presidential campaign, which was planned for March 8, 2003 in Port Harcourt, the capital of Rivers State. As a leading figure in the party that was likely to mount the most serious challenge to PDP in the 2003 elections, Marshall's death had major political implications. To further support the accusation against the PDP was the fact that the assassination happened the day after Marshall sent a letter of complaint to the Inspector-General of Police alleging that Peter Odili, the PDP governor of Rivers State, had been stockpiling arms and training gangs of thugs. In the letter, Harry had accused Odili of trying to stop ANPP supporters from launching their election campaign in the Rivers State's capital, Port Harcourt.

2.3. Ogbonnaya Uche

An ANPP senatorial candidate in the Southeastern state of Imo and former commissioner in the Imo state government, Ogbonnaya Uche, was shot in his home in Owerri on February 8, 2003, and died two days later. Uche told journalists before his death in the hospital, that he believed the attack was political, and explained that two days before the shooting, he had been trailed to the party secretariat by a group of armed men, who had asked his driver where he was.

2.4. Abigail and Barnabas Igwe

In the Southeastern state of Anambra, Barnabas Igwe, chairman of the state branch of the Nigerian Bar Association, and his wife Abigail Amaka Igwe were ambushed in their car and brutally murdered in Onitsha, in September 2002. Barnabas Igwe had been an open critic of then Anambra state Governor Chinwoke Mbadinuju, and had called for the governor's resignation due to his failure to pay government workers for several months. Mbadinuju was the only one of twenty-one PDP

governors who could not get a re-nomination of his party in the 2003 election due to his alleged involvement in the murder. He was charged to court for the murder but was never convicted.

2.5. Ayo Daramola

A PDP governorship aspirant in the Southwest state of Ekiti was killed on August 14, 2006 in what the police said could be a political assassination. Ayo Daramola of the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP), was stabbed and shot in his hometown of Ijan-Ekiti. His assailants scaled the fence of his home, attacked his guards and burrowed a hole to his bedroom where they killed him, according to the police. Daramola was killed hours after he staged a campaign rally in the state capital Ado Ekiti the previous day. A PDP senator, Bode Olowoporoku and former Deputy Governor in Ekiti State, Biodun Aluko, accused the state government of being the mastermind of the murder. That was the end of that matter as nobody was convicted.

2.6. Funsho Williams

Three weeks before Daramola's killing, on July 27, 2006, a leading governorship aspirant in Lagos State, Funso Williams of the ruling PDP was strangled in his home, a few hours after he returned from a political meeting. Williams was a leading member of the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP), which was locked in a bitter internal struggle over the Party's ticket for the Lagos coveted governorship seat. Although about a dozen top politicians were detained by the police in relation to his assassination, they were later released leading many to believe that like many past political killings, this would end up as another undetected murder.

3. LIST OF KILLINGS BELIEVED TO BE POLITICALLY MOTIVATED IN NIGERIA BETWEEN 1999 AND 2007

3.1. SOUTH EAST

- On April 19, 2003, a stalwart of the All Nigerian Peoples Party (ANPP), Onyewuchi Iwuchukwu, was murdered in Ikeduru Local Council, Imo State
- On April 20, 2003, an ANPP member of the House of Assembly, Toni Dimegwu, was killed in Imo State
- On March 27, 2003, Mr. Ikenna Ibor, an ANPP councillorship candidate in Anambra State was assassinated
- On September 1, 2002, Mr. Barnabas Igwe and his wife Amaka Igwe were killed in Onitsha, Anambra State. The then Governor of Anambra State, Chinwoke Mbadiniju, was arraigned
- In February 2003, Theodore Agwatu, principal secretary to the Imo State Governor, was murdered by suspected hired assassins in Owerri
- On February 7, 2003, Mr. Ogbonnaya Uche, a chieftain of the ANPP and a senatorial aspirant in the Orlu senatorial zone, Imo State was gunned down in his residence not long after he defected from the PDP to the ANPP.
- On August 29, 2001, Chief Victor Nwankwo, younger brother of Dr. Arthur Nwankwo, founder of the Eastern Mandate Union and a known political activist, was assassinated in Enugu State
- On September 9, 1999, a few months after the return to civil rule, Sunday Ugwu, elder brother of Nwabueze Ugwu, a legislator representing Nkanu East Local Council in the Enugu State House of Assembly was assassinated in a case of mistaken identity

3.2. SOUTH-SOUTH

- On 6 February 2004, the National Vice-chairman (South) of PDP, Chief Aminosoari Dikibo was assassinated in Delta State on his way to the south-south PDP meeting in Asaba

- On March 5, 2003, Dr. Harry Marshal of the ANPP was murdered in his bedroom in Abuja. He was the National Vice-Chairman of the ANPP (South-south). He left the PDP for the ANPP following a rift with some top players of the party
- On June 3, 2005, the principal administrative officer of Uvwie Local Government Area in Oredo Local Council in Edo State was assassinated by unknown gunmen.
- In August 2005, Mr. Felix Eboigbe, councilor in Oredo Local council in Edo State was murdered
- On Christmas day in 2005, the Chairman of Warri South Local Council was murdered.

3.3. NORTH-CENTRAL

- On June 30, 2006, a governorship aspirant of the Advanced Congress of Democrats (ACD), Mr. Jesse Aruku, was abducted and killed near his house in Bassa Local council in Plateau State
- On August 15, 2002, the State Chairman of PDP in Kwara State, Ahmed Pategi was assassinated
- On July 27, 2005, PDP's Assistant National Director, Research and Planning, Mr. Anthony Ozioko, was murdered in his residence in Saburi-Gwagwa, Abuja
- On March 3, 2004, the convoy of the Benue State Governor, George Akume was attacked by suspected assassins on his way to Kaduna. Although he survived the attack, a member of PDP's board of trustees, Andrew Agom and Joseph Ngama, a police sergeant were killed.
- On March 4, 2004, Mr. Luke Shingaba, a chairmanship candidate, was killed in his house in Bassa Local Council in Kogi State
- On February 5, 2005, Sunday Atte, the leader of the legislative council in Yagba East Local Council of Kogi State, was murdered by unknown gunmen
- On February 18, 2003, A Security man in the residence of Chief Paul Unongo, ANPP gubernatorial candidate in Benue State, was murdered

3.4. NORTH-EAST

- On February 23, 2003, Speaker of the Borno state House of Assembly, Hon. Inuwa Kubo, escaped an assassination attempt on him

3.5. NORTH-WEST

- Alhaji Isyaku Muhammed of the United Nigeria Peoples Party (UNPP)

3.6. SOUTH-WEST

- On December 19, 2001, Mr. Odunayo Olagbaju, a member of the Osun State House of Assembly, was brutally murdered in front of a police station in Ile-Ife, Osun State
- On December 23, 2001, Minister of Justice and Attorney General of the Federation, Chief Bola Ige and leader of the Alliance for Democracy party (AD), was murdered in his bedroom at Ibadan, Oyo State.
- November 25, 2002, Lagos PDP governorship aspirant, Dele Arojo, was killed by unknown assailants
- On August 14, 2006, Dr. Ayo Daramola, a PDP gubernatorial aspirant in Ekiti State was murdered in his bedroom at his hometown, Ijan Ekiti. His death was linked to the intra-party crisis
- On July 27, 2006, Engineer Funsho Williams, PDP gubernatorial aspirant in Lagos State and Chairman, Board of Directors of Nigeria Maritime Authority (NMA), was murdered in his bedroom after a political meeting. Police are still investigating.
- On May 15, 2005, Alhaji Sulaimon Olajokun, a member of the Alliance for Democracy (AD) was murdered on his way to Lagos from Ile-Ife in Osun State.
- On July 16, 2005, unknown gunmen killed Alhaji Lateef (aka Lati Osogbo), a close associate of Alhaji Lamidi Adedibu, a topnotch leader of the PDP.

Source: The Guardian newspaper, August 17, 2006.

The list above reflects that political assassinations are widespread in Nigeria since the return to democratic rule in 1999. The above list is not exhaustive.

4. REASONS FOR POLITICAL ASSASSINATIONS IN NIGERIA

4.1. Political Investors

Running for a political post in Nigeria is a very expensive venture. As such, most political aspirants rely on the support of rich men who have been tagged “political investors”. These investors expect returns on their “investments” once their candidate wins the election. Since they have put down so much money, they will do everything possible including getting rid of the opponent to ensure that their candidates win. In order to meet the expectations of the investors therefore, some politicians resort to maintaining killer squads to intimidate the opponent or resort to political assassination as a last resort.

The State Security Services (SSS) in Nigeria once expressed fears on what it called rising penchant of politicians to raise and surreptitiously fund criminal groups in the country to oil their ambitions.”ⁱⁱⁱ

4.2. Military’s Intervention in Politics

Military intervention in politics has also been adduced as one of the reasons behind political assassinations in Nigeria and the inability of the politicians to imbibe the principles of democratic governance.

“The elite of our society are very ill conditioned to accept the principles of democratic governance. They have not stabilized internally to accept the kind of obligations that go with the rights involved in our democracy.” ^{iv}

The massive wave of retirees from the Armed Forces courtesy of Obasanjo’s military reform which necessitated the forced retirement of military officers who held positions under the previous military regimes have contributed to political assassination. Most of the retirees quickly re-adjusted to civilian life and had enough money to throw around. As such, choice political positions were cornered by them. Unfortunately, their only political tutelage was garnered from their participation in military rule which in itself is antidemocratic and intolerant of opposition. Hence, these new sets of politicians and their civilian allies who had also participated in military rule as ministers or commissioners have imbibed the culture of intolerance of opposition. This culture which metamorphosed under the Abacha rule where there were scores of state sponsored extra-judicial assassination was carried over to the present democratic milieu. It would be recalled that opposition leaders like Alfred Rewane, (the financial backbone of the National Democratic Coalition-NADECO), and Kudirat Abiola, the wife of Chief M.K.O. Abiola, the winner of the June 12, 1993 election were murdered by agents of Gen. Sani Abacha.

4.3. Politics as Zero Sum Game

Another explanation for political assassination in Nigeria is that politics is a zero-sum game in which the winner takes all. The apparatuses of the state are routinely used to oppress and intimidate the opposition. The “power of incumbency” is almost limitless such that those in the opposition are routinely hindered even from pursuing their daily affairs to make ends meet. The implication of this is that no Nigerian politician wants to be in the opposition. Hence, both the incumbent and the opposition sometimes resort to extra judicial means to maintain or achieve political power respectively. Political assassination is just one of those extra-judicial means. Election manipulations and intimidation of political opponents are some of the other means.

4.4. Arms Proliferation & Youth's Indolence

Youth restiveness in the Niger Delta and smuggling of small arms into Nigeria by politicians and ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) returnees have all conspired to increase the rate of political assassination. Between March 2004 and August 2006, the police recovered 3, 662 illegal arms and 194, 259 rounds of ammunition.^v Unemployed youths who have access to such arms were hired to carry out assassination as a means of livelihood. A paper published by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in July 2002, entitled "Poverty in a wealthy economy: the case of Nigeria" detailed the growing gap between the rich and poor. Its introduction states that "The benefits of government and foreign investment have only reached relatively narrow strata of the population, while the majority of the people have not benefited from higher productivity or increased real wages." The paper shows that:

- Average spending in non-poor households was four to five times as much as in poor households, despite the latter having more children.
 - Rural households were significantly poorer than urban households.
- Ever since, conditions have grown worse for the majority of Nigerians. Real incomes have fallen consistently.

4.5. Ineffectiveness of the Police and Other security apparatuses

The badly equipped police have shown limited ability to halt the politically motivated violence, and several apparent political killings since the return to democracy in 1999 remain unsolved. Apart from being poorly equipped, the police have always been curtailed by the whims of the faction of the ruling class in power. The police have therefore failed in tracking the perpetrators of political assassinations such that these perpetrators who have gone away with murder in the past continue to resort to it to settle political scores. Besides, the different security apparatuses have not been able to cooperate meaningfully to deal with the problem.

4.6. Compromised Judiciary

The Nigerian judiciary is largely compromised and corrupt. Politicians get access to judges through retired senior judicial officers who serve as consultants to those politicians. These retired judges bribe their former colleagues on behalf of politicians to thwart the course of justice.

4.7. Sacred Cow Syndrome

The tendency for Nigerians who have connections with the ruling elite to get away with criminal activities may have even further encouraged political assassination. The Anambra state saga is instructive here. The then governor, Chris Ngige, was kidnapped in broad day light by agents of his political godfather, Chris Uba. Uba's plot was not without the support of some police officers especially, the Assistant Inspector General of Police in the zone. The governor fell out with his godfather over disagreement as to the amount of money that should be transferred from the state's treasury to the godfather on a monthly basis. Uba himself confessed to being the mastermind of the act, and equally confessed to having rigged the 2003 election in favor of Ngige. Uba later committed arson on the state by burning down some state properties. Uba was never prosecuted.

5.CONCLUSION

This paper has reviewed the cases of political assassination in Nigeria between 1999 and 2007. In Nigeria, the desire to get political power in order to have unbridled access to state's resources has been the major course. As it is, Nigeria's ruling elites are "lions" who are self-serving and are prepared to use force to achieve or maintain their position. Hence political assassination is a political formula towards achieving or maintaining their positions. Political assassination has continued to undermine the credibility of elections in Nigeria. Any election where violence is allowed to play a prominent role cannot be adjudged to be a free and fair election.

It is expedient that unresolved cases of politically motivated killings should be reopened. Those cases already in the law courts should be diligently prosecuted. There should be no sacred cow. Those convicted of having something to do with political assassination should be banned from political activities for life. Use of the youth as political assassins will be mitigated if youth unemployment is also resolved.

Politics should be made less lucrative in Nigeria. Legislative position should be made a part-time job and politicians with inexplicable wealth after their tenure should be prosecuted. The code of Conduct Bureau should see to this.

Political killings would most likely continue unless serious re-orientation of the people towards civilian politics was done to stop the decline in moral code and standard of behavior.

REFERENCES

ⁱ "Ehindero: Politicians Carry Arms at Rallies", This Day Newspaper, 9 July 2006.

ⁱⁱ Edwin Madunagu, "www.nigerdeltacongress.com/particles/political_assassination.htm"

ⁱⁱⁱ SSS Expresses Fears for 2007 Polls, Raids Atiku's Campaign Office, ThisDay Newspaper, 30 August, 2006.

^{iv} Daily Sun Editorial, 28 July 2006.

^v "Ehindero blames SSS for political killings", Punch Newspaper, 7 Sep 2006